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ABSTRACT

California will be spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a school ranking and reward system under the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA). The PSAA aims to make schools responsible for their students' academic achievement and progress. PSAA includes a method to measure how well a school is doing, called the Academic Performance Index (API), a program to help schools that are considered "underperforming," and rewards for schools judged to be doing a good job or improving significantly. This parent guide provides impartial, factual answers to frequently asked questions from parents about the PSAA: What is the API? What is a good API? What do API scores and the ranking system tell about schools? How will high performing schools be rewarded? (DFR)

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PARENT GUIDE

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California's Public School Ranking and Reward System

ED 446 366

California will be spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a school ranking and reward system under the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA). The PSAA aims to make schools responsible for their students' academic achievement and progress. Signed into law in April 1999, the PSAA includes:

- A method to measure how well a school is doing, called the Academic Performance Index (API)
- A program to help schools that are considered "underperforming"
- Rewards for schools judged to be doing a good job or improving significantly.

This Parent Guide provides impartial, factual answers to frequently asked questions from parents about the PSAA.

What is the Academic Performance Index (API)?

The California Department of Education computes school scores by combining students' SAT-9 test results for all grade levels and subjects into a single number between 200 and 1,000. This composite API score becomes a measure of a school's performance.

The SAT-9 (Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition) is a national standardized multiple-choice test sometimes called the Stanford-9. It covers basic mathematics, reading, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation in grades 2–11. It also covers spelling in grades 2–8 and science and history/social science in high school. Each year, school districts must test all students in grades 2–11 unless exempted by parent request or special needs.

What is a "good" API score?

A school is considered "high performing" if it has an API of 800 or above. Schools that score at or above 800 must at least maintain their scores. Schools that score below 800 need to close the gap between their score and 800 by 5%. Each year, schools get a new target based on their scores in prior years.

For example, if your school scored 500 on the 1999 API, its target would be 515 for the 2000 API: 800 - 500 = 300; 300 x 5% =15; 500 + 15 = 515.

In the 1999 API, released in January 2000, 13% of the state's elementary schools, 11% of its middle schools, and 5% of its high schools reached 800 or better. The lowest performing school scored 302. The highest scored 966. The average score was about 630.

The PSAA program includes separate rankings for the three types of schools—elementary, middle, and high—based on API scores. Each number in the ranking from "1" (lowest) to "10" (highest) represents 10% of the state's schools. A "1" ranking for a high school means that 90% of the state's high schools scored better than that school. A "10" means that the school performed in the top 10% of high schools.

The rankings did not include schools that are very small, run by a county office of education, or are in a special category such as continuation schools. A separate accountability system is being developed for those schools. If your school wasn't ranked, talk to your principal about your school's accountability system.

What do API scores and the ranking system tell me about my school?

The API is the centerpiece of California's program to hold schools accountable. It compares how your school's students as a whole perform relative to other schools in California.

At this time the API includes only one measure of a school's performance—its SAT-9 scores. The law (PSAA) calls for future APIs to be based on a variety of measures, such as student and teacher attendance, graduation rates, and test questions based on new academic standards. But state officials do not yet have a reliable way to collect the other data. As more data is included, the index will become more complete and useful as a measure of school quality.

For now, your school's academic performance ranking is only one measure of the success of your school. You should consider other indicators as well, such as academic support for struggling students, opportunities for advanced students, programs in art and music, and extracurricular activities.

What is the "similar schools" ranking?

The 1999 API also showed a strong correlation (or relationship) between students' SAT-9 scores and their family income, parent education level (such as high school or college graduate), and students' knowledge of English. Schools with large numbers of students who live in low-income households, for example, tended to have lower API scores.

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Partly because of problems in comparing schools with very different student populations, the PSAA created a second ranking system that compares similar schools.

This similar schools ranking—also from "1" (lowest) to "10" (highest)—measures how well a school is living up to its potential based on its challenges. It compares a school's API score to the scores of 100 other schools with similar characteristics. These characteristics include student mobility, ethnicity, fluency in English, family income, and parent education level.

How will the API affect my child?

The governor and state legislators do not want any child to be left behind in California's school system. Each school must show that all significant subgroups of students (based on family income or ethnicity) have improved their scores. The API weighted scoring system also encourages educators to focus on low performing students with the greatest needs.

This "data-driven" approach to educational accountability is new for many educators. Most school principals and teachers are examining their school's SAT-9 scores. Talk to your principal about how this change is affecting what happens in your child's classroom.

What role can parents play?

In many schools, principals meet with parents in the School Site Council, PTA, or Home and School Club to discuss how to improve student achievement. Talk to the president of your school's parent organization about how you can get involved. You can also talk to your student's teacher or guidance counselor to find out how you can help your child.

What is an underperforming school?

By definition, the state considers about half of the approximately 6,500 tested schools as underperforming. These schools fall below the average API score.

Is there a program to help underperforming schools?

Each year, the California Department of Education (CDE) will choose a small number of these schools—about 400—to participate in the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP).

The CDE gave the first set of schools chosen to participate in the II/USP a $50,000 grant for the 1999–2000 school year. The schools used this grant to develop a state-approved plan to improve their scores. The CDE will also continue to give schools a minimum of $50,000 to implement their plans for each year that they participate in the program. School districts must match the state funds.

Schools that participate in the II/USP program have two years to show their API is improving. If the score does not improve, the CDE has a number of options such as removing staff and reorganizing the school. As a last resort, the CDE may take over the management of the school.

If an underperforming school improves well beyond its growth target, the state may give the teachers and principals one-time performance bonuses.

What about high performing schools? Will they be rewarded?

All schools who meet or exceed their 5% API growth target are eligible to receive a Governor's Performance Award. The schools must show that their significant subgroups of students (based on income and ethnicity) are improving as well. The state allocated $96 million for the first year's awards in the fall of 2000.

Each school district will negotiate with the local teachers' union to determine how the funds are distributed within a school. An award-winning school that shows improvement in the future may continue to receive annual bonuses.

The law also calls for nonmonetary awards such as public recognition and possibly allowing top schools more freedom in spending funds earmarked for special programs or students.

How can I find out more?

You can talk to your principal, your local school board member, or the president of your school's parent organization. For information at the statewide level, you can:

- Look at the API score for your school on the Internet at the Education Data Partnership website www.ed-data.k12.ca.us
- Visit the Department of Education's website www.cde.ca.gov/psaa, which lists API scores as well as other information about the PSAA program
- Contact the Department of Education by e-mail at psaa@cde.ca.gov
- Call the Office of Policy and Evaluation at 916/657-2757

(Internet access is available in public libraries.)

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